


LEGENDS

JOAN CRAWFORD



SERIES EDITOR
JOHN KOBAL

INTRODUCTION BY
ANNA RAE BURN



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Photographs from
THE KOBAL COLLECTION



To Ben Carbonetto with thanks for your
help and friendship over the years

J.K.

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JOAN CRAWFORD

Joan Crawford conned me. Me and many like me. I thought she was tall. She was small to average. I thought she was classy. She came from nowhere at all. I thought she was dark with liquorice-coloured hair and great shadowed eyes. She was a blue-eyed redhead. But the con ended when I thought she was one of those people the camera loved. She was, and it did.

It was the only love Joan Crawford permitted herself to fully reciprocate and it took more of her commitment than any other single thing in her life. Somewhere behind that face, which some find harsh to the point of ugliness, was a frightened and inadequate person who had only one chance at anything and that was getting into the movies. She took her shot and she hit a winner, but the cost was high. She paid for it, privately and publicly, and hung on long after anybody else would have done, because by then the script seemed to say that she should. And the script dominated her life.

Much of the script was written by Crawford herself. She married four times, adopted four children and her career falls into four sections which were defined by the times, the available opportunities, the studios and their attitudes towards her; but if there were gaps in the ground plan, she filled them in. She made up the character of Joan Crawford as she went along. And all the accounts of it, whether by those who knew her and adored her, those who knew her and didn't like her, or those who were just writing what was required, reveal the strain that the script imposed.

She was born in poverty and out of wedlock in San Antonio, Texas, under the zodiacal sign of Aries, though the year is uncertain and like many women she was shrewd enough to keep it so. Here begin the confusions she spent her on-and-off-screen persona trying to rationalise. Her mother parted from her father before she was born and until she was seven she was brought up with another man as her father. She had an older brother whom her mother allegedly adored because an even earlier sibling had died. At the age of seven Billie Cassin, as she was known, discovered that she was born Lucille LeSueur, and that Henry Cassin, who had introduced her to the smell of greasepaint through his own travelling vaudeville show, was not her father. She didn't meet Thomas LeSueur until she was twenty-six.

Her mother wasn't much luckier with Cassin than she had been with LeSueur, and when he was discovered to be an accessory to a robbery, the family moved on. Growing up listening to them fighting about money, knowing there was another man in the

background who hadn't worked out either, Crawford can't have had many illusions about what makes the world go round or about how rarely white knights on chargers come to any woman's rescue.

And then there was school. There really wasn't enough money for school, so she waited on tables, made beds and washed dishes to help pay for her tuition. Children being as cruel as they are, she felt her friends looked down on her, and they probably did. She was sent to another school, but the workload this time was even heavier and the headmaster's wife a bully. She ran away repeatedly but her mother was unsympathetic. The principal chose to falsify her high school certificate rather than admit that her education had suffered because of the hours she had to work.

By now there was another 'father' on the scene, and he was all too interested in her. She fled him to go to college, but there still wasn't enough money and she still had to contend with working for the same people with whom she was supposed to socialise as a student. Was she that lethal mixture of poor and proud? Was her fierce temper the problem? Was she a dreamy girl with ideas above her station, or did she just have a rough time? We'll never know. What we do know is that there was no help from home, nobody to talk things over with, no frame of reference into which she could put her ideas.

The one bright spot in all this gloom was that she had discovered that she could dance, indeed she had already won a cup for dancing at a fraternity ball. She knew that she could only bluff the authorities about her high school education until exam time, when her inadequacies would be painfully revealed, so she left college and landed her first job, an engagement in the chorus of a touring review. Including rehearsals, the whole adventure only lasted a few weeks, but, when it folded, the leading lady invited Crawford to look her up if she were ever in Chicago where, she said, she knew an agent who could always find work for a pretty girl.

Crawford went home, where a few weeks of sharing the house with her mother, her layabout brother and presumably her mother's over-enthusiastic lover was enough to make her take the remnants of the salary she was earning working in a department store and set out for Chicago.

The leading lady she sought was out on the road with a show, but she found the agent's address in the telephone book and rushed over to see him. The waiting-room

was filled with tall, slender, attractively dressed women who she quickly realised were the competition. In desperation she pushed to the front of the queue and into the agent's private office. He was there with his wife and she flung herself on their mercy. She couldn't go home, she hadn't any money, she must have a job – wouldn't they please help her? The force of the Crawford personality was yet to be channelled but clearly it was already in evidence. It's a wonder she wasn't hired as Lady Macbeth. Anyway, they sympathised and promptly found her work. Within a few months and a couple of engagements, she was spotted for the pre-Broadway try-out of a musical. She was the baby of the production and there wasn't much money involved, so she worked in a night-club after hours, singing and dancing with the customers, which is where she was seen by MGM executives.

It is not unusual even now for people who work in glamorous but precarious professions to cut their losses, move fast and grab every chance they get. That's par for the course. What was unusual in this case was that Joan Crawford was far from the usual chorus girl. She was five feet three inches tall and, frankly, fleshy. On the plus side, she had a remarkably symmetrical face, a square mouth, striking colouring with dark red hair and enormous blue eyes; and she had the defiant brassy personality you'd expect of a come-from-nothing kid in the first era of the fast-living, free-loving independent Twenties.

She took two screen tests and, asked if she wanted to act, said she wanted to dance. Then she went home to wait and see. When she was offered a six-month contract, she was sure she was on her way, not just sure with the understandable optimism of an attractive young woman, but sure with the cast-iron certainty you need to preserve on the outside if you dream the celluloid dream.

But two things were clear. The first was that the camera – movie or stills – added weight; and the second was that it liked its leading players to look young and to continue to do so.

Crawford was like every other contract player in that she had to work where she was sent. She was dissimilar in that she threw herself into experimenting with her physical appearance, imitating both current fashion and every reigning movie queen in a determined attempt to hold attention. Probably what made the greatest impression was that she looked completely different every time you saw her, whether on the set or the street.

And she posed and posed and posed, in every mood and many disguises, for the studio publicity shots with which the studio kept the fan magazines nourished. The fan magazines' image of Hollywood was stars and an endless supply of pretty girls playing tennis, swimming, being thoughtful, presenting prizes, kissing sailors. Everybody, even the young Garbo, had to do it, a lot of them complained about it; Garbo eventually stopped; but Joan Crawford loved it – loved all that posing, loved the camera!

As the weight was reduced and the face and the personality emerged more coherently, audiences asked to see more of her and she posed for more and still more pictures. To the photographers and the men in publicity she worked with she was a delight; if only because she gave herself to anything they asked her to do two hundred per cent. She was likeable and she was professional. Her contract was extended, as she had intended it should be, and she never stopped work. And whenever there was any time left over, she danced. It was, after all, the Jazz Age and she was a jazz baby.

By now the famous competition to find her name had been held. She couldn't be called Lucille LeSueur, the studio decided, because even if somebody could pronounce it, it sounded suspiciously like 'sewer'. The name chosen was Joan Arden, but it was discovered that an actress with this name already existed, so Crawford was the suggested amendment. Crawford herself disliked it so much that she pronounced the first name 'Jo-Anne' for years, adding that the last name reminded her of crawfish.

And when she wasn't in a film, dancing, having her picture taken for some purpose or other, or experimenting with her hair, her make-up or her 'look', she was learning anything else she could learn, because she knew that she wanted to be very good at being her, even if she didn't know quite who that her was yet.

In 1928 she appeared in six pictures, including *Our Dancing Daughters*, in which she won the coveted role of Diana, the socialite flapper. Importantly, the public responded enthusiastically to her, and as it was left to independent theatre owners to decide whose name to headline, she wound up being called the star of the film. Equally importantly, *Daughters* contained a sound sequence and her voice, unusually low and distinctly Western, was a success too. And she was deeply involved with Douglas Fairbanks Jr her co-star in the sequel, *Our Modern Maidens* (1928). In 1929, they married.

They were both young and unfinished people, he suffering from being the son of a world famous father and a step-mother, Mary Pickford, who was the acknowledged





Queen of Hollywood, and she really driven in this world which she had adopted and in which she wished to be a power above all things. He was Hollywood aristocracy, and she was the beautiful girl from nowhere. His parents opposed the marriage, and both his mother and step-mother Mary Pickford found Joan alternately too assertive or paralytically shy and inept. Typically of Joan, she learned from all that too. She learned the cutlery and the conversations, she started reading much more thoughtfully and taking a wider view of the world. But, more importantly to her, she appeared in the all-star, all-talking picture, *Hollywood Review of 1929*, and both she and it were box office. Having overcome the hurdle of the talkies, she would be among the first to recognise that *Our Dancing Daughters* and its spin-offs were the summit and thus the end of part one in her life. The Thirties were coming and they demanded something different. She determined to define that difference and personify as much of it as she usefully could.

There are endless stories about how Crawford changed her face, most of which was probably accomplished by steely determination and a slow rhythmic movement of the head from left to right where food was concerned. Nevertheless she is widely believed to have had considerable dental work (one story has it that she had her back molars removed to define those formidable cheekbones), and plastic surgery is alleged, including the slitting of her eyes to make them look bigger. This last was probably impractical as well as unnecessary, for with the weight loss and the dentistry emerged a startlingly refined sculptural beauty. But what was she going to play, and who was she going to play opposite?

She was smart enough to know that she had to break into drama, which she did better than many believed she could opposite Douglas Montgomery in a film called *Paid*. But just as it seemed she had made a significant step forward, her next project turned into a pallid trifle so misguided that it never saw the light of day. By now Crawford knew that large numbers of women looked to her for a form of escapism, that they came to see her and not the movies she was in; and she also knew that she had to have strong leading men to offset the virility of her own screen presence.

From their first film, *Dance Fools Dance*, it was clear that the screen chemistry between her and Clark Gable was high voltage, they made eight films together (the last one was in 1940) and they were deeply fond of one another. However, they were both married, and Crawford was increasingly aware that although her career was panning out, her

marriage wasn't. She and Fairbanks took a two-month trip to Europe which, far from bringing them together again, simply highlighted their differences. He liked the social set, endless entertaining and was happy to visit all the doors that were open to him. She had grown to hate entertaining. She needed peace to compose herself for the fight the next day. Read? She read scripts. Clothes? She had fittings at the studio wardrobe. He wanted to enjoy life. She wanted to be a star, first, last and always.

It cost her her first marriage, but once that was decided, she went back to work with a vengeance, trying to find a way of persuading L. B. Mayer and the other studio heads that she must have roles she could do something with. They gave her *Letty Lynton*, in which she did quite well, until the film was hit by a copyright infringement suit, causing it to be withdrawn. Crawford admired Garbo, MGM's most luminous star, and she envied Norma Shearer, who was married to Irving Thalberg, Mayer's head of studio ('How can I get any part Norma wants when she sleeps with the boss?'), and she insisted on being taken as seriously as they. What a thin cloak her dignity and professionalism must have seemed sometimes against the chill of studio indifference. But her next role was one of those steps forward they allowed her to take every so often – Flaemmchen, in *Grand Hotel*, with Garbo miscast as a ballerina, Lionel and John Barrymore (the latter was rarely better), and Wallace Beery. It was one of Crawford's finest performances, precisely timed and judged, with graceful movements, throaty voice and wry but dreamy eyes. She managed to be 'no better than she should be' and charming at the same time.

Then she took a risk and went all out to portray Sadie Thompson, the prostitute heroine of Somerset Maugham's play *Rain* in the film of the same name, and whether she was miscast, whether her public wouldn't accept her extreme interpretation, or whether Lewis Milestone failed her directorially, it just didn't come off. She couldn't, she said, 'work from within to without', and it's conceivable that all those struggling women who admired her so much didn't like being reminded how very near the edge of respectability they sailed by a star who had on this occasion gone right over the top.

Her next picture, *Today We Live*, was loaded with talents (Faulkner to write, Hawks to direct, Cooper to star), but she wasn't right in it and it wasn't right anyway. It flopped.

At this point she needed a successful, tried and true formula picture, which was what she got in the form of *Dancing Lady*, with Fred Astaire, in his film debut, to dance with and Clark Gable to kiss. Franchot Tone played the elegant alternative who loses her to

Gable on screen – but in life, she lost Gable, never really having had him, and settled for Tone, though they didn't marry until 1935.

Again it was an attraction of opposites. He was quiet, bookish and well-bred, with a good education in and out of the theatre. Being able to depend on him briefly alleviated the insecurity which was her driving force. They made a film together (*Sadie McKee*) in which she decided once again to look different and began growing her hitherto plucked eyebrows. At about this time she had met her father, Thomas LeSueur, for the first time. The story is that they were very much alike except that he had the eyebrows and she made of her face the mask of the father she had not known, like some arcane charm to make her stronger in the face of her chosen battles. The studio kept her busy with two more films with Gable, and Tone introduced her to performing on radio.

During the four years of their marriage, the honeymoon of which was overshadowed by the attempted blackmail of Crawford over an alleged 'stag' film in which she appeared naked, Tone encouraged Crawford to try for more serious roles, a happy endorsement of the direction in which she herself wanted to go. But she was torn as ever between what the public wanted, what the studio wanted her to do, and she must have known more bitterly than many at the end of this period the harsh film industry maxim, that you're only as good as your last picture.

'America thinks you're Cinderella,' said Louis Mayer, pointing her in the direction of another formula picture called *I Live My Life*. It was unmemorable so, although warned that she was not the type for a costume picture, she got her way with the consolation prize of the lead role in *The Gorgeous Hussy*, which served to showcase the young James Stewart while pushing Franchot Tone deeper into 'Mr Crawford' territory with a tiny role. 'But Joan,' argued Mayer, 'we needed him in that role. We can't have you walking off into the sunset with a nobody.' Mayer won but Joan lost, for Tone now knew his own career was locked off by his wife's higher position in rigidly hierarchical Hollywood. They were on the downward road from then on, a road grimly reinforced by her inability to have children (she had two miscarriages during the marriage and was widely rumoured to have all sorts of problems due to previous abortions) and her unrelenting tenacity in the face of the studios on-again, off-again commitment to her. Five more films brought her to the end of this somewhat stagnant part of her life, for although they all made money at the box office, they did nothing to develop Crawford



as an actress. *The Ice Follies of 1939*, for which, with matter of fact aplomb, she learned to skate, she described economically as 'trash'. She was unhappy, still striving, still tied to the idea of doing her best for the studio which had nurtured her, and painfully aware that the camera has its own independent perceptions of everything. How much longer would it continue to be kind to her, knowing (even if L. B. Mayer did not) that Cinderella did not have a thirtieth birthday?

Again she demanded better roles and landed the scheming Crystal in *The Women*, in which she was directed by George Cukor, one of the foremost 'womens' directors in movies. This is the only film in which she appeared with Norma Shearer, the Canadian-born star with whom she vied for the title 'Queen of the Lot' at MGM. Although there are some interesting bits and pieces among a thirty-four-part all-female cast, she comes out of it better than most because the piece is dated but she plays a bitch, and bitches don't date.

Following this success, she played with Clark Gable for the last time, in *Strange Cargo*, where she was allowed to be more a person and less of a lady than the script or the studio frequently permitted. She looked good wearing little or no make-up, a revolutionary decision for those days, and played well and the critics remarked it favourably.

Mr Cukor re-entered her life with a comedy about a society woman who gets religion, called *Susan and God*. The part was originally intended for Norma Shearer. Crawford, probably pacing somewhere, drawing heavily on a cigarette and wondering how to help herself, received a telephone call from Mayer. 'Would you be willing to play a mother, Joan?' he asked. 'I'd play Wallace Beery's grandmother if it's a good role,' replied she, and he explained that Norma had declined the role and Mr Cukor was asking for her. That she was not a comedienne both she and Mr Cukor knew, but the lines were funny and she had the courage to play Susan as overwhelmingly silly and a bit larger than life to good effect. The public wasn't taken with the film or Joan, but Cukor thought she was great.

And while she was 'hot', Cukor secured her for the leading role in *A Woman's Face* (a re-make of one of Ingrid Bergman's Swedish films), that of Anna Holm, whose terrible facial scars lead to her hunted bitter personality, and who is transformed by the care of a plastic surgeon who gives her back herself with her remodelled face. She was

highly praised for her performance, and rightly so. That Crawford had cinematic gifts was not in question, but rarely did she manage to find a director and a vehicle which would make good use of them. Cukor knew that she knew a great deal about the technicalities of film-making. He knew also that stardom was not a system which develops actors. Stardom is a system which develops stars and it is much harder to manoeuvre within that system and grow at all, without disturbing what made you great and famous in the first place. But he liked Crawford, and she responded well when she was liked; and he was a great director of women, so he was able to draw from her what she was rarely asked to give.

For example, in the scene in which she tells the story of the scar, he asked her to read and she declaimed. So he explained to her that people with deformity become terribly patient about it. It is, after all, permanent, and emotion goes out of the thing if you have to live with it and deal with it every day. So she tried again. Presently he said to her, 'Joan, just say it like a multiplication table – no emotion. The audience will do the rest.' So she tried it, and then stopped and did it all again. He asked her why she did it twice and she told him that she could feel he didn't like her first take. Crawford described the film as the highpoint of her career at MGM, but when it was over, she faced the same problems that she had faced ten years before. The studio was devoting its energies to two other younger and cheaper names, Greer Garson and Lana Turner who would have first choice for the big roles, and she had to face continuing to do as she was told, fighting for better scripts and going on suspension to avoid the worst of what she was offered, or else leaving MGM.

It is said that her contract was not renewed by mutual agreement. It is also said that Mayer didn't want the guilt of forcing her away by not renewing the contract, but preferred instead to pressure her into going by having all her belongings packed and her staff informed that she would not be returning to the lot. As Mayer knew her well, he knew that she would capitulate faced with this withdrawal of goodwill. Whatever it was and however it happened, it brought to an end seventeen years of work, and it was a low blow to a loyal worker.

Crawford knew her fans still loved her and she couldn't continue to let them down, so she prepared herself for the long haul to find the part that would mean a new beginning for her. She signed to Warner Brothers two days after she quit MGM for a



third of the salary she'd previously received, but she sought – and got – script approval, and she hung on for three grim years until she found the part she wanted.

During those three years she endeavoured to live the life of a Hollywood Queen on a salary which was markedly less, and this undoubtedly cost her pride and the discreet sale of some of her jewellery. But she came of the breed who believed that to admit difficulty was to countenance defeat. It wasn't her way. She had earlier adopted two children and according to their testimony and the comments of all sorts of acquaintances and friends, she was as hysterical in her discipline of them as she was of herself. She had nobody on whom to model herself as a mother and so she tried vainly to give the children the framework she thought would help them, which had been so noticeably missing in her early life. But she couldn't love them, especially when they began to emerge as individuals, and much of the drama which ensued with violent scenes, running away and great unhappiness all round, is all too redolent of her own far from happy childhood. She married again, too, as a sort of adjunct to the children, an actor called Philip Terry of whom she was honest enough to say, 'Never marry out of loneliness. I owed him an apology from the first.'

Her first screen appearance for Warners in *Hollywood Canteen* came under the heading of goodwill. But her second began a new phase of her remarkable life. The title role in *Mildred Pierce* had been turned down by Bette Davies and Barbara Stanwyck when producer Jerry Wald suggested Crawford for the role. The parallels between the screen character and Crawford's own were remarkable. There was unhappiness, suffering, ambition, determination, stubbornness to the point of psychological disturbance, disappointment and a totally false ending. It was never believable that Mildred Pierce would return to her first husband in the way and on the terms that she apparently did. In this role Joan Crawford established forever the stereotype of the strong woman whose strength is only acceptable when it is suborned for another's good.

However, it brought together an effective cast and it gave Joan Crawford what she longed for – another crack at the Hall of Fame and an Oscar. This was part three of the saga her life had been so far. Waiting to get hold of a part like Mildred Pierce didn't count as part of anything. Waiting is done in the lobby and Joan Crawford still definitely wanted to be centre stage.

Her next two films, *Humoresque* with John Garfield and *Possessed* with Van Heflin

and Raymond Massey, seemed to augur well for the move from MGM to Warners. They were intelligent, strongly crafted dramas, with heavyweight actors, in which although Joan was encouraged to look as good as she could (which was usually very good!), she played grown-up people with good and bad sides to their characters. Perhaps *Daisy Kenyon* was only enjoyable to those of us who were intensely curious about Crawford as a person. There's a lot of what people say was her in that portrayal: the passionate sense of order, the effortless attraction of men, the conflict between what she thinks she should want and what she really wants.

But the good beginning at Warners was not consolidated even though the steamy-trash *Flamingo Road* was one of her biggest hits. Her next six films kept her working, kept her before those who admired her, and in the line of fire from the critics who commented on the remarkable longevity of her screen career as regularly as they pointed out how inflexible was her acting.

She knew she must escape before her career ossified, so she made the moves to release herself from Warners and become freelance. At about the same time she adopted two more children, both girls, and though they fared rather better than her two earlier adoptees, all four of the children seem to have been no more than necessary props to Crawford while she discovered another major role for herself. In the way of children, too, as they grew up, they emphasised the march of time against which she fought a fight as fierce and bloody as any Alamo.

She discovered the novel on which her next film *Sudden Fear* was based and although she and co-star Jack Palance didn't see eye to eye, she turned in a fine performance and dared to hope that MGM would want her back. She made a film for them, her first in colour, *Torch Song*, with Michael Wilding, she sang and danced, but it flopped and she knew the dream of another long contract was over.

For the first time, there were reports of her being unpleasant to her colleagues on the set. It is easy to see how, as she knew she had peaked in terms of how she looked and what she could accomplish, so she began to increase her demands that she should be noticed, have attention paid to her, be acceded to – in the manner of somebody who feels they haven't made it but cannot give up. Take away her work and she had nothing. By now she was scrubbing her floors as compulsively as she scrubbed her hands every morning before she removed the face mask, the chin support, the

'butterflies' to suppress frown lines. She still had beautiful skin and a remarkable figure, she was still a beautiful woman – but the 'still' wasn't a compliment, it was a painful reminder that there was only so long to run in the terms she had set herself.

She made a series of films in which she played older women – creme de la camp in *Johnny Guitar*, rich and strange in *Female on the Beach*, rich and nasty in *Queen Bee*. By this time she had met Alfred Steele, first President and latterly Chairman of Pepsi-Cola. Whether because she had a desperate sense of time running out and was therefore prepared to make efforts in a marriage she had not been prepared to make before, or whether she just hit lucky, there is no doubt that this fourth marriage was a great deal more rewarding than any of the others, and brought her not only a measure of personal happiness but something else to do.

The leitmotif of Crawford's life had been the expenditure of energy in order to stay calm. The endless knitting, the hands moving ceaselessly over embroidery, tapestry, hooking rugs: the running, swimming, exercising, dieting, facials, manicures: procurement and trying out of make-up and hairstyles, the constant pursuit of patterns and materials, of clothes and shoes and furs and handbags and jewellery – this all went on when she was regularly employed. When she was not regularly employed, they continued interspersed with some very heavy drinking (she methodically drank 100 per cent proof iced vodka) and fretting until she could be working again. But by now she was accustomed to only one kind of work, and Alfred Steele introduced her to another.

The timing was heaven-sent because although she made a number of other movies, and she starred in them, they were not the vehicles she would have chosen. She had come up against a problem still being encountered by the major female film actresses of today: there are few roles worth playing for a female star once she looks over the age of forty. However, she had also come up against her own need and desire to go on earning, being seen, and being seen to be doing the thing she'd spent her life striving to perfect, which was being a movie star. So she toured the world with Alfred Steele and she became his personal celebrity public relations campaign for Pepsi. She met, she greeted, she enchanted and she had all the accessories for the part. These adoring fans didn't mind that she wasn't the active film star she had once been. For them the fact that she was there invested in her all over again the energy, youth and unassailable beauty which had been hers for thirty years. For this public, that she was



there was enough. And of course Crawford attacked this new career with the demanding perfection which had characterised her professional standing for years, which led to some strains between her and Alfred. Sadly he collapsed and died after only four years, and Crawford arranged his funeral and the readjustments she had to make in her own life with the calm, businesslike authority which people had ceased to admire and privately begun to find suspicious. Did she have a heart at all?

After Steele's death, Crawford was the first woman elected to the Board of Directors of Pepsi, and she continued to work for them, promoting their product and meeting their distributors for many years to come. But the final part of her life had begun, and it involved growing older and eventually ill, which was harder for Crawford than for many.

An old friend in the shape of producer Jerry Wald thought getting her back to work would be a good thing and encouraged her to come back in the small but highly publicised role of an emotionally disappointed if professionally successful woman in *The Best of Everything*. When one considers that about all the other women in the film were less than half her age but Crawford got all the publicity, and the lions share of the reviews, she may have felt encouraged to think that there was still another tomorrow for a woman over fifty. If so it was short lived – six more films, only one of which stood out. The film was neither triumph nor disaster, but Crawford played well and looked good. In her remaining six films Crawford played what she could get – and what she could get was mostly eccentric parts in horror movies. The cream of the crop was her role as Blanche opposite Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* She suffered nobly and revealed that though age had made its inevitable incursions into her beauty, the beauty was still there. However, the success of that movie in terms of praise was all Davis's, and Crawford was openly resentful about it. Her ability to play a real role only surfaced once more in the cinema in a film called *Straight-Jacket*, in which she was highly strung and hypnotically watchable, the shadow of all the wonder she'd been before. Although she did some competent work on American television. Her career ended with two low-budget horror films in England, where incidentally, Bette Davis was doing the same thing to survive.

And she withdrew. Part of the withdrawal was to do with the knowledge that the heavy make-up she now felt she needed was all too apparent to the cameras. Perhaps it was

to do with knowing that there really wasn't much further to go. She had never been noted for her acting, just for her being, and if that wasn't as ravishing as once it had been, perhaps it was time to retire gracefully. Her earnings from Pepsi came to an end. She discovered that there were not great amounts of money to be spent in the future, so she cut down. She moved into a smaller apartment, she simplified her life – though I can't help wondering what happened to those thousands of hats and pairs of shoes for which special closets had been designed inside the enormous room-sized wardrobe space she had had in the Fifth Avenue apartment which she shared with Steele.

Flashes of her old spirit showed. A friend arrived to take her to lunch – one of the few friends who reached her past the ever-present answering service – and as usual she looked wonderful, especially her hat, an elegant creation, the brim lined with rosy silk. They talked and he listened, thinking that she looked, right then, as good as ever she'd done, and eventually he said, 'Joan, you look wonderful. That hat's so becoming.' 'Why the fuck do you think I wear it?' replied the lady with her most dazzling smile.

And perhaps the illness that claimed her had already begun. It was cancer that killed Joan Crawford. Cancer located in the perfect Freudian place – the back. According to Freud, an aching back is a sign of mourning, and she mourned for a great deal.

Out of a career spanning fifty years and eighty-one films, Joan Crawford mourned that she was not acknowledged for the contribution she had made to the establishment and international repute of the film colony of Hollywood which had been her life. All the failures she cared about were public ones: the wrong film, the wrong role, the wrong physicalisation of that role. She lived through the movies she made, and even when they were frankly mediocre and inadequate, she gave them the very best her dazzling armoury could offer.

She made herself up to fit in with the requirements of the times. MGM endorsed her, but it never let her go far enough to discover whether she was more than they thought she was or not, and she was far too afraid to make that journey without their paternalism and protection. She acted out in a continuing psychodrama, on and off set, the demons which began all those years before in Texas. She invested heavily in her ability to personify everything that Hollywood films had to offer. She worked at that diligently, and when she could no longer fill that bill, and they cast her off, she had no resources upon which to draw. It was literally too late to change.

**WORKING NIGHTS
SLEEPING DAYS**

Please be Quiet

THANK YOU

JOAN CRAWFORD

She remains an electric presence even in some very unsatisfactory movies. Everything about her shone – her hair, her lips, her handsome hands, her graceful strong body and legs, her elegant feet. Everything looked as though it had sprung from nowhere, shining. Perhaps we know too much nowadays about what it takes to make a star and what a price is paid. All I know is that Joan Crawford shone. That's why they called her a star.

ANNA RAEBURN

‘Joan was nurtured on the camera and she was very knowledgeable about it. She wasn’t aware of it, she didn’t act *to* the camera, but she acted *for* it.

She knew a great deal about it. She got into movies very young and she had this wonderful equipment for the screen. She had this marvellous force for the screen that moved beautifully, and that welcomed lights.’

George Cukor











'Miss Crawford is at her best in the
mad scenes. The actress has obviously
studied the aspects of insanity to re-create a
rather terrifying portrait of a woman
possessed by devils.'

Howard Barnes
New York Herald Tribune, review of *Possessed*, 1947

















































'Joan Crawford had the most beautiful eyes and teeth. A wonderful period jawline, and her nose was perfect. It was chiselled. Right at the bottom of everyone's nose there's an area of imperfection, but with Joan's it was finely chiselled right at the very tip end of the nose, and the nostrils had a slight flare. She had a style of her own and a personal magnetism that was individual. It's no wonder she had such a tremendous following.'

Sydney Guilaroff
MGM's top hair-stylist





'Joan Crawford . . . has a temperament without being temperamental . . . When she meets with disappointment she has a tendency towards bitterness rather than remorse, which, no doubt, is a throwback from an acute memory of less happy days.'

Douglas Fairbanks Jr
in a written profile of Joan Crawford, after the break up of their marriage

















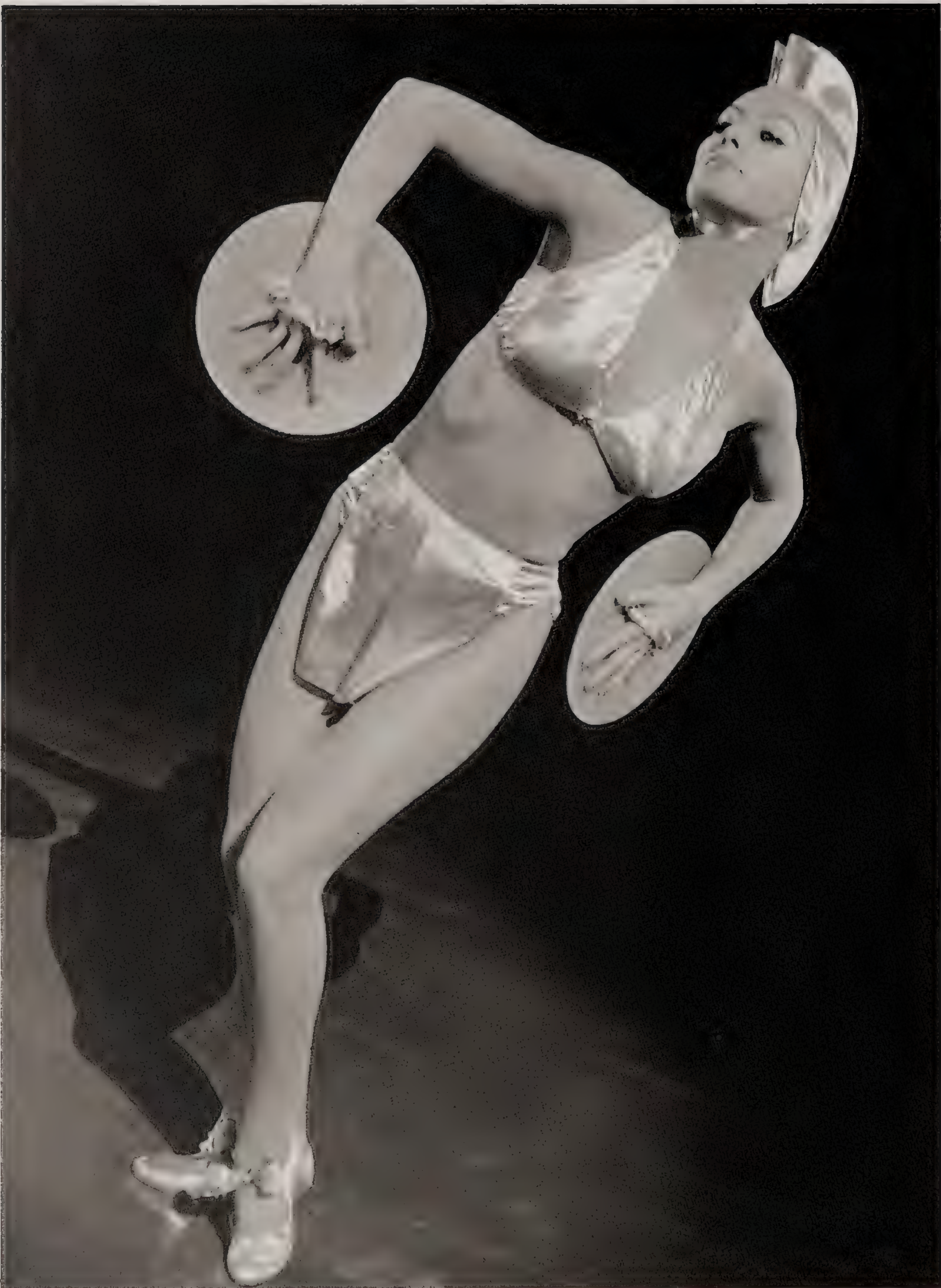
























'Joan Crawford behaved like a star.
Some do, some don't . . . You know, when
Joan came on the set, somebody came
on the set.'

Rosalind Russell





'My first impression of Joan Crawford was of glamour. Glamour had nothing to do with aloofness or temperament, it had to do with friendliness, tremendous vitality and hard work, ambition and constant desire to improve her work, and to get knowledgeable about things that were important to her work.'

James Stewart











































































'Joan Crawford, as much as I dislike the
lady, is a star.'

Humphrey Bogart

'Joan was a star in every sense of the word.
She didn't remind you of it in any particular
way. You just knew it. And you didn't think
any less of her for it.'

Henry Fonda

























HURRELL'S CRAWFORD

Describing the instant when an art work is conceived (not born, but conceived, as when sperm and ovum meet to form a cell which then divides), William Blake wrote:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
This Moment & it multiply, & when it once is found
It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed.

Looking through the lens of his camera, George Hurrell found this 'Moment' in the faces of Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, Myrna Loy, Norma Shearer when those faces were 'rightly placed'. He found it as the 'Industrious' find it after years of training, searching, watching, coming closer, moving in, arranging lights. He found it by keeping also a certain action, 'yelling, hollering, moving things around, keeping up a pace.' Sometimes, as with Harlow and Crawford, the 'Moment' became 'just a single light on the face, and everything else black.' All the 'yelling, hollering, moving things around' were renovated by that 'single light' catching, for example, the 'dark shadows' under Crawford's eyes, shadows which his lighting had made. These 'shadows' he caught, releasing a radiance that multiplied, went out into the world in a motion that was 'still', the photograph itself being a 'moving picture', a 'picture' with a context that was itself a form of action. For millions of moviegoers, Crawford's face raised the action of the often mundane plot into another kind of action, making the mundane strange and unfamiliar, the temporality of unfolding events eternal. Events in the face of Crawford became larger than life. Ordinary events became at the same time a constellation in the night sky around a brilliant star.

George Hurrell would never describe it that way. When discussing his photographic sessions with Gable, here is how he talked: 'Not slouching or falling apart – you had to remember that there were a million women out there waiting to see this picture and he's got to look like "if I can just get my hands on that guy." So you had to give the photographs that "Why don't you come up and see me sometime? look." ' Hurrell talked the way everyone in Hollywood talked about the movies in the '30's. With few exceptions (Keaton and Chaplin perhaps), no one knew then that Hollywood was making art. Had Hurrell known what he was making (as opposed to what he was doing), he would have described what Gable had to 'look like' in a rather different way. He had to 'look like'

an inaccessible presence, a presence that was absent to the touch while inviting the 'million women' to 'come up'. To see but not to touch, to quicken and reject desire, to suspend a 'million women' in a dream landscape governed by an 'if', if only, 'if I can just. . . .' Those 'million women' want Gable to step out of the frame or out of the still the way Woody Allen makes it happen in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (which is Gable in the '30's). But that way of happening is the way of the dream. It's a wish-fulfilling fantasy enacted somewhere else, the 'ever after' of 'once upon a time'. It can never be directly entered in the waking, conscious state. The inaccessibility of Gable or Crawford in a Hurrell photograph is the inaccessibility of the unconscious itself. Hurrell probed the unconscious, granting us a glimpse of what was there. 'A lot of things I did with Crawford and Harlow were shot that way – just a single light on the face, and everything else black,' Hurrell explained in the Hollywood manner. The 'everything else black' is also the darkness of the Bijou, a single light sending its projection-booth beam from the unconscious onto the silver screen to reveal the faces of desire.

What does Hurrell's vision of Crawford's face reveal? What does he make out of the raw material of flesh, bone, follicle, vein, artery, sinew, muscle and fatty tissue? And why the need to make it as if improving upon God's original fiat: Be and It Is? Embedded in the creative instinct is an imperative desire for what the religious call a 'second birth'. The hidden impulse behind Hurrell's 'yelling, hollering, moving things about' is to quicken or awaken some buried animation hidden behind a bushel as from the light of day. The creative impulse is a light shining in the darkness, trying to illuminate the darkness, like the darkness of Crawford's face. 'Initially,' writes John Kobal, 'photography had captured the popular imagination with its speed. . . . PRESTO, just a matter of Hold It, Hold It, Hold It, Hold It, Hold It. . . . CLICK.' Paul writing to the Corinthians put it this way: 'Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of the eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.' In its own 'profane' way that's the 'mystery' that Hurrell shows us: the raising of the dead, the corruptible becoming incorruptible, and all in 'a moment', the 'twinkling of the eye' which is the 'CLICK' of the shutter. 'Behold,' Hurrell declares, 'I show you a mystery,' a mystery that is not in the mortal eye but in the immortal lens.

Not knowing himself the artist that he was (a not-knowing that in those innocent

Hollywood days allowed the artist simply to be), Hurrell made the left eye (sometimes the eyes, but more often the left eye) of Crawford the symbol of the camera's eye. Crawford's left eye in a Hurrell photograph tends to look directly into the camera's eye to become its mirror image. The 'CLICK' of the camera lens is also the sure point of focus in the picture, the direct gaze of Crawford's eye. It looks less at the viewer than through the viewer or into the viewer, fixing him as if pinning him to the wall. It is the eye of confrontation that impales. Eliot's Prufrock has known such eyes, anticipating in 1917 what millions of Crawford's fans would later experience, fans who were never likely to know Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (though Eliot would know Crawford and the spell of popular culture which his jazzy love song evokes). 'And I have known the eyes already, known them all,' Prufrock confesses like one of Crawford's fans raised on Hurrell's photos,

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

Something of Crawford's aggressive, slightly sinister and brooding presence, which is her lighted eye contained within a shadow made by an artificial eyelash, speaks in this cry of the formulated Prufrock. Crawford's power on the screen was to rivet her fans to their seats, pin them wriggling as they watched her in one 'sleazy' film after another spitting out 'all the butt-ends of [their] days and ways'. One thinks of her first in those films when her stance was first defined: Sadie Thompson in *Rain* spitting out 'butt-ends' in lighted glances, staring looks, tense movements with muscles straining, taut dresses and dusky, masculine speech, until, despite himself, they become Walter Houston's own repressed recognition of his 'days and ways', his own androgynous longing for that other side of himself. For a moment, of course, his slightly prostitutish, missionary zeal saves her, but only for a moment. Crawford is beyond conversion, being archetypally fixed. A thrust of the ankle restores her to herself, leaving Houston to his drowning as a sacrifice to her power. Crawford, remaining Crawford, obedient to the camera's command, puts the needle to the gramophone record as a junkie puts a fix, restoring

in a single gesture to popular culture what Eliot in *The Waste Land* had appropriated to higher ends:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass;
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over';
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

Crawford could put a record on the gramophone better than anyone else. She became for popular culture what Eliot in his jazzy moments was to high culture. In Hurrell the two cultures meet. And she became them because, like all those extraordinary creatures that we call the Hollywood stars (their era is past), she was the offspring of the camera, a mere mortal born again under studio lights before those lights left the Hollywood studios and took, among other things, to the streets. She was the archetypal vision of a woman constellated by the Industrial Revolution, the anima or soul of that Revolution even as Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* is the flag-carrying, breast exposing, anima or feminine soul of the July Revolution of 1830. (A decade later Horace Vernet would place a nude engine driver at the controls of a steam locomotive on the ceiling of his *Palais Bourbon*.) Crawford was uniquely that vision of the woman because of her masculine strength, her sheer lit muscular presence so startlingly like George Hurrell's glamour photograph of Johnny Weismuller in *Tarzan the Apeman* (1934), and so startlingly unlike the more feminine presence of Charles Boyer photographed by Robert Coburn in 1937 or Robert Taylor photographed by Ted Allan in 1936. Crawford in her archetypal presence was 'the mechanical bride', the bride who descends to meet her bridegroom who is the camera or the machine. This theme – the bride as machine, the bride in the machine, the feminine soul of the machine – haunted Marcel Duchamps for many years beginning with *Nude Descending a Staircase* which he withdrew from *Salon des Independants* in February 1912 because, as he said, 'it was off the beam. . . . A nude never descends the stairs – a nude reclines, you know.' Garbo reclined where Crawford descended. Dietrich could do either, being less masculine though more

androgynous than Crawford. Striding a chair is where she began. What was startling about Hurrell's Crawford was a new kind of feminine nudity, a nudity of face and stance that thrust itself forward with what Kobal has rightly described as an 'intense, almost masculine, energy', an energy that, by comparison, turns the glamour photographs of Gary Cooper into reclining nudes.

The nude is, of course, the subject that dominates all classical art. The fusing of the sensual and the sensuous appears to be its goal. In popular culture, the culture of the film, that classical nude becomes the face, above all, the face in close-up which stands for the nude. The presentation of the face in film, as in the glamour photograph intended to 'sell' the film, assumes the role (and the challenge) of the nude in classical art. More than that: the face in close-up becomes in film the enactment of a powerful and passionate dance like the dance of the seven veils, a dance which Josef von Sternberg clearly identified with the shifting lights playing on Dietrich's unveiling face. The nude face, unveiling itself before the camera (and with the camera's help, it being a mutual seduction), became in the film the arena within which and upon which a psychic drama unfolded, revealing the hidden meaning of every outward event. The face of the star became a continuous soliloquy, like the continuous internal dialogue in O'Neill's enormously awkward *Strange Interlude*, a play that cries out for the camera to shut his characters up. The function of the lighted face of the woman lay in the refinement of the action until with Dietrich and Garbo (though never with Harlow and Crawford) the action almost was swallowed up. Dietrich's face, like Garbo's, became the action, their films moving as their careers advanced toward the 'still' itself. Nowhere is this more apparent for Dietrich than in *The Devil is a Woman*, or, supremely for Garbo, the final lingering shot of Garbo's face in *Queen Christina*, a shot that devoured the film, reduced it to an essence. In that final shot, the film was emptied of its content. Its entire creation passed away; nothing remained except Garbo's face. 'I told her,' the director, Rouben Mamoulian later confessed, 'to empty her face of everything and to look without blinking, to make her face a blank parchment on which everybody who saw it could write what they felt. This was the Garbo achievement.' As a 'blank parchment', Garbo's face became the silver screen itself upon which 'everybody' could project their own inner action from their own internal projection booths to make of that face films of their own. It was the epitome of the silent film, the quintessential iris dissolve, as far in one ascending direction as the motion picture could go. After that, Garbo could only be

made to laugh. Her laughter was the breaking of a spell that also ended the era of the great Hollywood portrait photographers. In a later celebrated gesture, Robert Rauschenberg erased a de Kooning drawing which de Kooning had given to him. He called it *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. It now belongs to the *Museum of Modern Art*. In the final lingering shot of *Queen Christina*, Mamoulian was symbolically erasing his film, replacing it with the the most haunting 'still' ever created, as haunting in its own way as Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.

Perhaps the chief evidence of continuity between the silent era and the sound film is the survival of the close-up. In the silent film the close-up replaced or stood for the voice, dialogue, monologue, speech. It did the work of sound. With the coming of sound, however, the close-up survived the loss of one of its functions. Mime, no longer a necessity, survived. What survives necessity becomes art. The history of the sound film has, therefore, as its sub-text the gradual recognition by those who make film that what they are making is art. The era of the great Hollywood portrait artists (such as Bull, Bachrach, Ray Jones, Bert Six, Virgil Apger), and those stars whose fame and fortune were largely dependent upon them, was the bridge between necessity and art. They helped to make conscious the silent art of the silent film. The face in close-up, despite sound, remained the focus. Not surprisingly, therefore, Crawford insisted after George Hurrell left MGM in 1932 that he go on photographing her for the rest of the decade. (At least until 1937 when the Austrian photographer Laszlo Willinger arrived from Germany and managed to please the demanding female stars with his drawing-room environment – putting a living room where the bedroom used to be.) Her 'stills' were what her films were really about. Without them, she feared they would lose their meaning. They might slouch and fall apart, which was the reason that Hurrell, working in his studio, kept 'yelling, hollering, moving things about, keeping up a pace.' Crawford knew who and what had created her. She knew that without Hurrell 'yelling' she, as his creation, might dissolve right back into ordinary life. Hurrell 'keeping up a pace' was locating her in his lens, wedding her to his camera and to the careful arrangement of lights. He was locating her in the constellation of a night sky upon which movie-goers in the darkness gazed.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

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Title: *Letty Lynton* 1932, photograph by George Hurrell, MGM

Frontispiece: photograph by Karsh, 1947, Warner Brothers

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- 3 With her adopted children, Christina and Christopher, circa 1950
- 4 *Humoresque* 1946, off set, Warner Brothers
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- 70 *No More Ladies* 1935, photograph by George Hurrell, MGM
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- 77 *The Bride Wore Red* 1937, photograph by George Hurrell, MGM
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JOAN CRAWFORD

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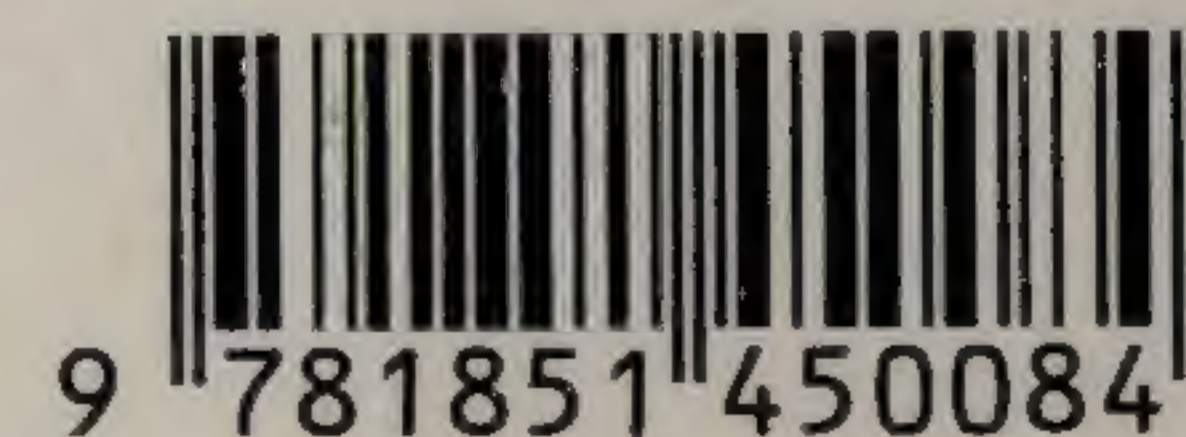
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